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SUBJECT: PUBLIC CHAMBERS CARVE NEW ROLE IN RUSSIA'S REGIONS

Classified By: Acting Political M/C Robert Patterson. Reason: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Russia's regional elite are taking cues from the center and establishing "Public Chamber" bodies to provide a forum for societal organizations -- human rights, ecological, social advocacy -- to make their voices heard by regional administration and legislatures. Given the increased visibility of the Federal Public Chamber in recent months, regional activists have some hope that they will be better positioned to influence policy through participation in locally-sponsored institutions. Yet many within both the social activist camp and in the government are skeptical, fearing at worst that politicians and bureaucrats will use the regional public chambers as another instrument for controlling civil society or will ignore them completely. In two Siberian regions, Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk, where the administrations have only recently established public chamber organizations, most are taking a "wait and see" approach to the new institutions. END SUMMARY.

Building From Existing Organizations

¶2. (C) In the past year, regional administrations have followed Moscow's lead and established Public Chambers. Federal Public Chamber member and head of the Chamber's Commission for Regional Development Vyacheslav Glazychev told us that about half of Russia's 84 regions have created their own public chambers. In the remaining regions, governors have been opposed to creating a forum for possible public dissent and criticism, but are under increasing pressure from Moscow to follow suit. Indicative of the trend, both Krasnoyarsk Kray and Irkutsk Oblast established Public Chambers over the past year, reportedly as a means of currying favor with the Kremlin.

¶3. (C) Krasnoyarsk Ombudsman for Human Rights Mark Denisov had responsibility for organizing his region's Public Chamber in his previous job on Governor Khloponin's staff. Five "chambers" had already been established before the regional leadership decided to create its own overarching Public Chamber, each with a particular constituency and issue set, such as veteran's organizations or the women's issues. Over the past year, an additional four "chambers" have been established for nationalities questions, ecological defense, and other social issues. Denisov, with Khloponin's direct guidance, sought to use those structures as "building blocks" for an all-region Public Chamber. Ultimately, they decided upon the creation of the "Citizens' Assembly," with an organizing committee composed of 34 members (with the possibility of adding an additional six members). Half of the members are selected from the societal organizations themselves, with each of ten chambers selecting two committee members. The governor and legislative assembly pick an additional fourteen members.

¶4. (C) As in Krasnoyarsk Kray, the newly assembled Public Chamber in Irkutsk Oblast was built upon existing societal

structures, according to chamber member Galiya Bobkova of Irkutsk State University. She saw the creation of the Public Chamber as an evolutionary step in a long process of social activism and "liberal" opposition in Irkutsk. Tracing the movement's roots back to Soviet-era ecological protests against a paper/pulp mill on nearby Lake Baikal, Bobkova explained that regional activists had been attempting to influence government policy, while simultaneously working to foster understanding about funding opportunities for social work and to teach organizational techniques. The Irkutsk chamber has 60 members, 15 appointed by the governor's offices, 15 by the legislative assembly, and the remaining 30 elected by those appointees.

15. (C) Bobkova expressed cautious optimism about the Public Chamber's potential, even though she complained that the agenda thus far targeted "serious" issues, but not those that the societal organizations would have chosen themselves. She also outlined some of the bureaucratic hassles that the Chamber members are facing. Her committee on education wanted to post a letter to the legislature but was unsure which letterhead to use -- a sign that the Irkutsk Chamber's work is also circumscribed by administrative issues. Already, the Chamber has discussed the merits of a gasification plan for the northern part of Irkutsk Oblast and Babkova boasted that they had fulfilled their task of recommending solutions without creating a "lot of noise" politically.

Irkutsk Public Chamber:
"A Club of Limited Interests"

16. (C) Regional political observers and media are far more skeptical about the potential for the regional Public Chambers. In general, our contacts expressed admiration for the delegates "as people," but saw the selection process as biased in favor of pro-administration voices. Dmitriy Lyustritskiy, the Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the Irkutsk Vostochno-Sibirskaya Pravda newspaper, complained that the regional Public Chamber is useless, a "suitcase without a handle." Living up to his reputation as one of the more strident opponents to the Chamber, he noted to us that two-thirds of the appointees had no experience with politics, and the other third was composed of former players in regional politics. Ultimately, Lyustritskiy saw the regional body as having far less gravitas than the federal Chamber and commented that the best and brightest of those who might have represented the region at the local Chamber had already left for Moscow.

17. (C) Aleksey Petrov, of the now defunct regional branch of the Union of Right Forces (SPS) political party, complained that the Irkutsk Public Chamber was not a broad representation of society, but instead promoted the same circle of government-linked players that had dominated regional politics for many years (essentially turning Babkova's assertions of continuity into a critique). He noted that the Chamber had made a declaration against a planned agglomeration of the cities of Irkutsk, Angarsk, and Shelekhov into a single municipality. The unification scheme had been the brainchild of former governor Tishanin, with the idea that creating a "mega" city of more than 1 million residents from the existing towns would allow Irkutsk to be more competitive in garnering Federal monies and, perhaps, an IKEA complex as well. According to Petrov, the Chamber made its ruling without actually having an open discussion, suggesting that it was following "acting" governor Esipovskiy's orders to reject his predecessor's agenda.

18. (C) The Chair of United Russia's Executive Committee in Irkutsk Natalya Dengina gave a much more positive spin on things, claiming that the regional Public Chamber had played an important role in assessing the development plan to 2020 (which includes the agglomeration scheme). She noted that the Chamber had expressed concern about balancing tourism development with ecological preservation -- indirect criticism of Tishanin's proposals for creating a vast

tourist-recreation industry based on Baikal.

Krasnoyarsk - Just Starting

19. (C) Krasnoyarsk's Public Chamber has only just begun its work, so our contacts there tended to take a "let's see" approach. Denisov admitted some concerns about the work of the Public Chamber, including worries that government officials would try to use it to promote approval for particular policies. He also complained that many of the social activists suffered from a "paternalistic" approach and would use the Public Chamber merely as a channel for winning benefits or handouts from the administration. He also noted the highly formalistic structure of the organizing committee, which set very tight parameters for the Chamber's work.

10. (C) The attitude of Aleksandr Uss, Speaker of the regional legislature and leader of the United Russia faction, epitomized the general ambivalence within the elite to the new Chamber. He appeared surprised by the question and then answered that the fate of the Public Chamber in Krasnoyarsk Kray would depend upon society's acceptance of the new institution and the success of its members in organizing themselves and their work. He underscored that the administration already had an "experts committee" that worked with the legislature in structuring laws that took into consideration the full range of ecological and social impact, implying that the Chamber's input on legislation was not necessary. He expressed hope that the Chamber would serve as an "additional window" on the world for the administration and could help to grow civil society in the region.

Comment

11. (C) The experience of Krasnoyarsk Kray and Irkutsk Oblast gives testimony to the national trend in establishing Public Chamber organizations. Our contacts suggested that this trend reflected blind adherence to Moscow's dictates; an attempt to re-engage the "moderate" opposition forces that were cut out of the political process; and, perhaps more cynically, an attempt to force societal organizations to work with the state (and thus wean them off of any foreign funding). In any case, the question now remains about the effectiveness of those institutions. According to Alla Gerber, Director of the Moscow Holocaust Center and member of the federal-level Public Chamber, the benefit of participating in the Chamber for "outsiders" (i.e. activists outside of United Russia) is that membership gives the aura of being "one of Putin's children" -- a useful tool for pushing reluctant bureaucrats on particular issues. Whether or not regional members enjoy the same clout at their level will depend upon the status that the local Public Chambers enjoy and the relative weight that each governor accords to them. In the coming months, we will be watching to see how, or if, the Federal Public Chamber interacts with its regional affiliates as an indication of stronger organization and the creation of more inter-regional ties. At the same time, we will also monitor the work of regional Chambers to see if they are allowed to develop their potential as an "accepted" avenue for civil society to advance its interests or to see if the institutions become another link in the vertical of power.

RUSSELL